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In his State of the Union address last month, President Bush stressed America's need to break its "addiction to oil" – a welcome change from his Administration's previous view of high energy consumption as "an American way of life" that policymakers should protect. Democrats have been promoting conservation for years, and in our Innovation Agenda we proposed the sustained investment in R&D that will facilitate development of much-needed energy alternatives.

Unfortunately, the President's newfound commitment to breaking the oil addiction appears to be lip service. The Department of Energy, for instance, is already in the process of laying off researchers from its National Renewable Energy Laboratory. The layoffs stem from Bush-imposed budget cuts, and directly undermine technology projects in both wind and biomass – two areas promoted by President Bush in the State of the Union.

The President's budget cuts continue this Administration's anti-conservation policies. During negotiations on last year's Energy Bill, the Administration blocked a renewable portfolio standard and an oil savings amendment, measures designed to reduce our nation's dependence on foreign oil. I strongly favored these proposals because they would have required utilities to employ renewable energy sources while forcing the federal government to reduce oil use. Due to the President's opposition, however, these conservation efforts failed.

Increased vehicle efficiency offers the fastest way to reduce our oil consumption. Higher fuel economy standards would achieve this, but the President has repeatedly rejected this approach. Vice President Cheney calls energy conservation a "virtue," but won't deign to consider any conservation proposals. President Bush can claim he wants to end our oil addiction, but his actions tell a completely different story.

Some Republicans have criticized the President's proposal. These GOP critics say new energy sources do not warrant financial incentives or subsidies if they are to offer viable alternatives to oil. These folks have selective memory, conveniently forgetting the billions of dollars in subsidies the oil and gas industries received in last year's Energy Bill; they also forget that our government imposes taxes on ethanol imports from Brazil but not on oil imports, and that we spend hundreds of billions of dollars on military operations in the Middle East to ensure a steady

supply of oil.

By providing incentives – both direct financial investments and policy choices – the federal government can make a difference before oil supplies run critically low and prices become astronomically high. If the President took the problem of global warming seriously, for example, he and his fellow Republicans could have imposed a carbon tax several years ago and reduced carbon emissions. This move would have spurred private sector investment in alternative, carbon-free energy sources, freeing the government of the need to make such investments itself. Absent such policies, the federal government must now make those direct investments.

I appreciate the President's words, but he doesn't back them up in his budget. The President likes to accuse his detractors of having a "pre-9/11 mentality," but I fear he's the one stuck in the Cold War. Indeed, President Bush continues to direct billions of dollars to long range ballistic missile defense, a program that dealt effectively with threats from the former Soviet Union but which does little to address our current vulnerabilities. Investing even a fraction of this money in R&D for new energy technologies would far exceed the sparse funding behind the President's energy proposals.

With adequate funding, we could conduct comprehensive research in areas such as nanotechnology, which offers a range of opportunities to reduce oil consumption and generate new energy resources. Lightweight materials using carbon nanotubes deliver the same strength as current materials at much lower weights, allowing cars made from these materials to consume less fuel at the same level of comfort and safety. Nanoscale semiconductor materials can be tailored to capture a greater fraction of the energy from the sun than is possible using current solar cells, and car batteries constructed from nanomaterials could store more electricity at less weight than current vehicle batteries.

The federal government needs to combine direct investment and targeted policies to promote this new research and development and help move them into the marketplace. By setting agency targets for fuel consumption, for example, the federal government can position itself as an early adopter of more fuel efficient vehicles. It can also reach out to the private sector to publicize technologies that have been developed in government labs that might have applications in alternative energy generation, and provide targeted funding for the further development of research findings.

Because the President’s proposals fall short, we must take these important steps.